

**PART ONE**

**THE BAND BEGINS TO PLAY**

*O it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy go away";  
But it's "Thank you, Mister Atkins," when the band begins to play. . . .*

Rudyard Kipling



## Chapter 1

# A Boyhood Presage

By the early 1900s,\* my father was a brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad. He married Noelle Zoe Barras on November 4, 1912. To protect his job, my family moved frequently to various Louisiana towns. So it was that I was born in Lockport on February 15, 1921, the youngest of five children. Shortly thereafter, my family moved to Port Barre and remained there until the Great Depression.

Although I played cowboys and Indians with my friends, I always wore a Captain Eddie Rickenbacker flying suit, complete with Sam Browne belt and goggles! I was truly hooked on flying.

Sometime during the 1920s, a two-seater biplane, flying the U.S. mail or barnstorming, made a forced landing in a cow pasture about one mile from my home in Port Barre, Louisiana. I remember running all the way to the site with my childhood companions, Ellis Resweber, Sammy Bryant, and Alida "Sis" Bryant. As a "reward" for arriving first, the pilot lifted me up for a quick look into the cockpit. I was transfixed by the instrument panel with its gauges, dials, switches, all precision-made and, to me, incomprehensible, but with an elusive, underlying pattern.

\*At this time, spectrum analysis, electromagnetism, the atomic theory in chemistry, the molecular composition of gas, and the measurement of the velocity of light were widely discussed, though little understood.

As it turned out, this was truly a defining moment in my life! This makeshift, emergency landing strip in a cow pasture near my boyhood home presaged another airstrip far away from home in miles and in years on the battle-scarred island of Guadalcanal, in a cow pasture there known as Fighter One.

The Atchafalaya River cuts through the south-central Louisiana swamps as it makes its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Levees were constructed on its banks to protect the countryside from flooding when the high water came. In the spring of 1927, the Atchafalaya River levee collapsed at Melville, a town some fifteen miles northeast of Port Barre as the crow flies, flooding much of the south-central Louisiana countryside with eight to twelve feet of water.

Traveling in my father's Model T Ford, we visited Melville the week before to get a glimpse of the action we had heard about but doubted. Communications left a lot to be desired in those days. All we had in our home were crystal radios and regenerative sets. Superheterodyne radios—which mix the frequency of the received radio signal with another locally generated signal and convert them to an intermediate frequency to assist amplification and filter undesirable signals—were in the future. The rising water was awesome and the sight of men working in twelve-hour shifts, sandbagging the levee at various weak spots, was frightening.

The roads were muddy and full of potholes. A trip from Port Barre to Melville, requiring today little more than half an hour, took hours then. The return trip on the winding swamp road, enhanced every now and then by a chance encounter with an alligator, was completed in record time with the Model T huffing and puffing. The stately automobile retained its dignity

without even a flower out of place in the vases flanking both doors inside—a luxury item in the 1926 vintage Ford. These vases separated the deluxe model from the standard one and were a status symbol.

We were among the residents\* of Port Barre who fled before the levee broke, going to St. Martinville, a town some fifty miles to the south. But when the water began to reach the three-foot level there, we departed for Cade, a settlement located on a bluff five miles away. We were now free to watch the water rise over the countryside. We were lucky to have an entire second-floor screened porch as our home away from home until the waters receded.

Biplanes flew over the area to survey the damage and to find people stranded by the flooding. I was fascinated by the maneuvers of these aircraft as I viewed them from the rooftop of our quarters. I did not know that the planes I saw were taking aerial photos of the disaster below. From these flights, a plan would evolve to place two great levees, the east and the west guide levees, from Melville to the Gulf of Mexico. This project would funnel the spring waters from the north.

There was a price to be paid for this little gem. What nature had developed in a thousand years, man destroyed in ten.

\*There were six of us—Frank and Noelie (my parents), Marie, Frank, Marguerite, and me. My father had enough seniority to guarantee his railroad job. He worked the run from New Iberia to Mamou. We moved to St. Martinville because of the flood and the depression. Learning to drive became necessary for me since my father depended on some member of the family to drive him the nine miles from St. Martinville to the depot in New Iberia. (My dad died on December 30, 1961, and my mother on January 25, 1977. One of my sisters, Mathilde, born after Marie and before Frank, had died of diphtheria when she was very young. Marie died on April 21, 1995, and Frank on January 25, 1999. [May 2001 note])

Many beautiful old live oaks, large cypresses, and various other kinds of hardwoods and softwoods would soon disappear in the Atchafalaya Basin because of the rising land elevation caused by siltation.

Yet the project helped many of us orient ourselves in the swamp. The southward flow of water at high speed left the north side of tree trunks bare and their south sides with hanging streaks of debris. Only a city novice would get lost in the Basin. All one had to do was not panic if lost, but simply set a course east or west by moving ninety degrees across the tree lines until clear of the swamps.

There is a little saying among the Acadians, who like to play solitaire, that a hunter in the swamps should bring along a deck of cards. In case he got lost, the hunter would simply sit down, start playing solitaire, and within thirty seconds someone would surely come along to watch the game and perhaps say, "Put the red 'ten' on the black 'jack'!"